

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4636

S E C R E T BANGKOK 9487

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: SREF

SUBJECT: VIETNAMESE AND CAMBODIAN REFUGEES IN THAILAND

REF: A) STATE 119970; B) BANGKOK 9002; C) BANGKOK 8512

SUMMARY: WE HAVE NO INFORMATION THAT WOULD INDICATE THE THAI'S ARE ABOUT TO RETURN CAMBODIAN AND VIETNAMESE REFUGEES TO THEIR NATIVE COUNTRIES. THE RTG, HOWEVER CONTINUES TO REFUSE TO ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE REFUGEES AND WILL CERTAINLY ATTEMPT TO START RETURNING THEM AT SOME POINT. UNHCR AND ICEM HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO PLAY ANY USEFUL ROLE WITH THE RTG AND WE CONTINUE TO BELIEVE THAT NOTHING WILL DEVELOP. THIS LEAVES THE REFUGEES IN A HOPELESS SITUATION. END SUMMARY.

1. WE HAVE RECEIVED NO INFORMATION THAT THAI AUTHORITIES INTEND TO FORCIBLY RETURN CAMBODIAN AND VIETNAMESE REFUGEES WITHIN THE NEXT FIVE TO SEVEN DAYS. THE APOSTOLIC PRO-NUNCIO IN BANGKOK, GIOVANNI MORETTI, CALLED ON DCM MASTERS MAY 22 TO PRESENT A LIST OF 14 VIETNAMESE REFUGEES WHO HAVE BEEN SEPARATED FROM THEIR FAMILIES WHO HAD BEEN EVACUATED TO GUAM. IN HIS GENERAL REMARKS ON THE REFULEE SITUATION, MORETTI DID NOT MENTION ANY IMPENDING THAI ACTION AGAINST THE REFUGEES OR ANY VATICAN PLAN TO ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY. AN EMBASSY OFFICER ATTENDING A BASE COMMUNITY RELATIONS MEETING IN UTAPAO ON MAY 22 NOTED THAT ADMIRAL SAMUT SAHANAVIN, THE RTG OFFICIAL RESPONSIBLE FOR THE VIETNAMESE IN THE SATTAHIP

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AREA, STATED THAT THE RTG WOULD BE ABLE TO LIVE WITH THE

SITUATION FOR A WHILE LONGER.

2. RTG POLICY, HOWEVER, HAS BEEN TO AVOID TAKING ANY RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE REFUGEES, AND IN THE CASE OF THE VIETNAMESE, INSTRUCTIONS REPORTEDLY WERE ISSUED THAT REFUGEES COMING BY BOAT SHOULD BE PUT BACK TO SEA AFTER SEVEN DAYS. WE KNOW OF ONE CASE IN WHICH THIS ALLEGED INSTRUCTION WAS IMPLEMENTED AND 350 REFUGEES WERE SENT OUT TO SEA FROM PATTANI PROVINCE (REF B). IN MOST CASES LOCAL OFFICIALS HAVE MADE MAKESHIFT ARRANGEMENTS TO CARE FOR THE REFUGEES AND HAVE NOT FORCED THEM TO MOVE ON.

3. UNHCR HAS MADE NO VISIBLE PROGRESS WITH THE REFUGEE PROBLEM AND WE EXPECT NONE. MR. RASANAYAGAM, THE DEPUTY REGIONAL DIRECTOR, HAS EXPRESSED INTEREST IN ASSISTING THE SMALL NUMBER OF VIETNAMESE AND KHMER REFUGEES WHO WANT TO RETURN TO THEIR NATIVE COUNTRIES BUT SEEMS AT A LOSS AT WHAT TO DO WITH THE BULK OF THE PROBLEM. IN TAM, FORMER CAMBODIAN PRIME MINISTER, TOLD AN EMBASSY OFFICER ON MAY 23 THAT HE HAD APPROACHED UNHCR TWICE WITHOUT SUCCESS. IN TAM FIRST TALKED WITH FORMER UNDP CAMBODIAN RESIDENT REPRESENTATIVE F. SCHELLER WHO PROMISED TO CARRY WORD ON IN TAM'S PLIGHT BACK TO NEW YORK. AFTER RECEIVING NO RESPONSE, IN TAM MET WITH MR. RASANAYAGAM WHO TOLD HIM THAT ALL DECISIONS ON REFUGEES MUST COME FROM GENEVA. RASANAYAGAM OUTLINED THE CRITERIA FOR UN ASSISTANCE:

A) THAT REFUGEES MUST FIRST APPROACH THE THAI FOR PERMISSION TO SETTLE IN THAILAND;

B) THAT REFUGEES SEEK TO RETURN TO THEIR NATIVE COUNTRY IF THEY CAN DO SO SAFELY. RASANAYAGAM SAID HE UNDERSTOOD THAT THE THAI'S WILL NOT ACCEPT KHMER REFUGEES. HE ADDED THAT THE UN HAS BEEN UNABLE TO CONTACT THE NEW KHMER GOVERNMENT TO ASK ABOUT THE SAFETY OF RETURNEES. THEREFORE THE UNHCR WAS UNABLE TO MAKE A DECISION IN IN TAM'S CASE.

4. UNHCR WAS ALSO UNABLE TO WORK THROUGH THE RTG TO REMOVE A GROUP OF REFUGEES ON A FOREIGN FLAG CARRIER. RASANAYAGAM
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SENT A LETTER TO THE FOREIGN MINISTRY REQUESTING PERMISSION TO TAKE THE REFUGEES OFF THE SHIP AND WAITED FOR SEVERAL DAYS TO RECEIVE A RESPONSE. WITH NO RESPONSE BY SUNDAY, MAY 18, AND THE SHIP ABOUT TO SAIL, RASANAYAGAM CALLED AN EMBASSY OFFICER REQUESTING HOME PHONE NUMBERS OF MFA OFFICIALS. THE SHIP SAILED WITH THE REFUGEES ABOARD, HOWEVER, AND ANOTHER UNHCR OFFICIAL TOLD THE EMBASSY OFFICER THAT THE ORIGINAL REQUEST WAS APPARENTLY "LOST" BY THE RTG.

5. ICEM IS APPARENTLY NOT IN A POSITION TO ASSIST WITH THE REFUGEE PROBLEM EXCEPT THROUGH ITS COOPERATION WITH EMBASSY EFFORTS TO PROCESS AND MOVE THE KHMER WE ARE HELPING. THE RTG STILL APPEARS TO BE UNWILLING TO WORK THROUGH EITHER UNHCR OR ICEM SINCE THIS SEEMINGLY WOULD PUT THE RTG IN THE POSITION OF ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE REFUGEES.

6. ALL THIS LEAVES THE VIETNAMESE AND CAMBODIAN REFUGEES IN A HOPELESS POSITION. EMBASSY CONTINUES TO BE BARRAGED WITH LETTERS, PETITIONS AND WALK-IN CASES, MANY OF WHOM HAVE VERY LEGITIMATE REASONS TO EXPECT USG ASSISTANCE. WE ARE ABLE TO HELP SOME CAMBODIANS BY USE OF OUR PAROLE AUTHORIZATION. WE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO HELP NONE OF THE VIETNAMESE.
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